

John Hammond and the Hawks  
by Peter Stone Brown

Sometime in the spring of 1965, Vanguard Records released the third album by blues singer John Hammond, *So Many Roads*. It was the third album for Hammond (the son of legendary Columbia Records producer John Hammond) and his second album to feature an electric band playing Chicago blues. This time around Hammond chose to record with the bass player from his previous album, Jimmy Lewis, originally a string bass player who'd worked with Count Basie and Duke Ellington before switching to electric for Sam Cooke and King Curtis, and three members of a band he'd been jamming with in Toronto, and two up and coming musicians from the Chicago blues scene.

Here's what the original album cover for the LP (not the CD) said: John Hammond accompanying himself on guitar with C.D. Musselwhite, harmonica; Jaime R. Robertson, guitar; Mark Levon Helm, drums; Michael Bloomfield, piano; Jimmy Lewis, bass; Eric Hudson, organ.

The band from Toronto Hammond had been jamming with was of course Levon & The Hawks. C.D. Musselwhite would eventually be known as Charlie Musselwhite, and not long after this album hit the stores, that guy on piano who was already appearing on small label Chicago blues albums with various artists would record "Like A Rolling Stone" and the entire *Highway 61 Revisited* album with Bob Dylan.

*So Many Roads* was one of the records that led many people including this writer to dig deeper into Chicago blues and discover Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Otis Rush, Little Walter and Junior Wells and Buddy Guy among many others.

The music on *So Many Roads* is tough, loud and uncompromising. The reviews at the time thought Hammond went way overboard on the vocals, and probably quite a few people still think that. However, I like to think he was just totally into it and having a great time playing with a great band. Robbie Robertson's guitar dominates the proceedings, but Helm, a Chicago blues drummer if ever there was one is right there with him, while Hudson's not always audible organ snakes around the songs in an almost spooky way. Unlike Bloomfield, who would play in speedy runs, Robertson played in short explosive bursts going for sound and feel more than anything. Garth Hudson is best heard on "Gambler's Blues" and "Baby Please Don't Go."

According to some reports as well as interviews, Mike Bloomfield already knew about Levon & the Hawks, and Robbie Robertson and offered to switch to piano when he showed up at the session. While Hammond is a fine harp player, Musselwhite provides harp while the vocals are happening

the way Little Walter, Junior Wells and James Cotton among others did for Muddy Waters.

A few months after *So Many Roads* was released, I attended Bob Dylan's legendary concert at Forest Hills Stadium in New York City, his first full concert with a band backing him for the second set. The night was chaotic to say the least with half the crowd booing, and I didn't find out who the musicians were until the reviews appeared in the press a couple of days later because the musicians were not introduced. But when I found out that Robbie Robertson was on guitar and Levon Helm was on drums, along with Al Kooper on keyboards and Harvey Brooks on bass, my initial reaction was "Oh, the guys from the Hammond album." Dylan and Hammond were friends, look at the back of *Bringing It All Back Home*, and in the past 15 years photos have surfaced of him attending the sessions for that album.

Interestingly enough, three years later when The Band released *Music From Big Pink*, Vanguard did not capitalize on this and rush out the albums with stickers saying featuring The Band, the way Roulette Records did with old Ronnie Hawkins albums.

For those interested in finding the roots of the sound Bob Dylan would get onstage with the Hawks in 1965, and '66, *So Many Roads* is the key.